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ABSTRACT

According to the chair of the English department at Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.), NATALK, a telecommunications subconference on BreadNet for Native American students, has merits and possibilities for cross-cultural communication. Giving students the chance to "publish" their writing electronically can motivate reluctant writers. And for non-Native American students, it is an opportunity to respond to a different culture. The Native American productions on the computer, many of which are beautiful, artistic and narrative in nature, convey a frustration, anger or fear of education. Several examples illustrate the power and intensity of student writing. Education for them does not seem to be a liberating or empowering experience. Somehow, whether consciously or unconsciously, educators have prevented these students and others perhaps from talking about their frustration, values or ambitions in school. Perhaps educators fear the possibility of their own exclusion from such a discussion. Perhaps they want to give them the power to speak but fear exclusion should they give them the power to speak to each other in their own discourse. How does the reader respond to a Native American who has written a narrative about herding sheep, unless he or she tells her own story? Is the educator or the student willing to exchange story for story with the Native American? (TB)

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Talking back

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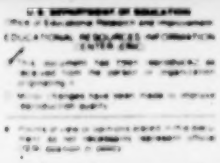

by Lucy Maddox

Lucy Maddox, Associate Professor and English Department Chair at Georgetown University and teacher at Bread Loaf, and her Georgetown students have been regular participants on NATALK, a telecommunications subsonference on BreadNet for Native American students. The 1991 Bread Loaf/Vermont senior class elected Lucy to give the commencement address. In her speech, Lucy focuses on NATALK, its merits and possibilities.

This commencement speech is only a series of questions and speculations, and many of the words in it aren't even my own. I want simply to mention some of the things I have been thinking and talking about lately, in and out of the classroom. They are things that have been on the minds of many of us this summer. And I want to read to you some brief comments from other people that have helped to shape my thinking. More specifically, I want to raise some questions about a subject that we have all heard a lot about lately, the subject of cross-cultural communication—which I have come to think of as "talking back."

Along with many of you, I have, for the last three years, been a regular participant on BreadNet, Bread Loaf's own computer network. BreadNet, under the leadership if Bill Wright, involves many teachers and their students, both in the United States and abroad, and it offers participants the opportunity to take part in a variety of conferences and projects.

The BreadNet conference on which I have been most active is one that was designed especially for teachers of Native American students; some of these teachers are in reservation schools, while others teach in non-reservation communities with a significant Native American population. We have also had two college teachers as participants on the conference. One of them is myself and the other is a former Bread Loaf student who has been teaching freshman writing courses in the Native American Studies program at Berkeley.

As the Native American conference has evolved, it has begun to serve two distinct purposes. In the first place, it has allowed the teachers to maintain a year round conversation about matters of mutual interest and concern. Usually this conversation is about pedagogical matters, but occasionally it has been about the seasonal return of the wild geese to Alaska or the reaction to *Dances with Wolves* on the Rosebud Reservation. This has been the most invigorating professional conversation I have ever had; I seldom talk about teaching with my university colleagues as honestly or as seriously as I do with my BreadNet colleagues.

The second purpose of the conference has been to provide an opportunity for the exchange of writing by our students, including my students at Georgetown and some non-Indian students at Berkeley. When we were first planning these student exchanges, we were excited about the possibilities. We believed, for one thing, that giving students the chance to "publish" their writing electronically might be a good way to motivate some of the reluctant writers among them. We also believed that we were launching an experiment in cross-cultural communication that was going to be excitingly productive. We were going to have Indian and non-Indian students, high school and college students, writing to each other about their schools, their communities, and their interests. The prospects looked good. We were going to *communicate*.

Three years later, I know that we have accomplished some of the things we intended to accomplish. We have gotten students to communicate with each other via the computer, and we have seen some reluctant writers beginning to take themselves seriously as writers and, apparently, to enjoy the experience of sitting down at the computer and writing for an audience. I have watched these things happen, but I've seen other things happening as well. I have watched my college students struggle to figure out how to respond to the Indian high school students. I have watched myself responding clumsily and very self-consciously to the Indian students. I have seen some of the Indian students turn reticent and awkward when they are asked to respond to someone else. And I have had to do a lot of serious rethinking.

I came to the network fully convinced that it was essential for all of us to listen to other voices, to hear from people whose perspectives have been largely excluded from our classrooms, our literature, our history texts, even from our imaginations. Three years later, I still believe that listening is

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essential; in fact, I'm even more persuaded that we must listen and that a computer conference like ours offers an excellent opportunity for listening. But my participation on the conference has also made me realize that there are some essential questions remaining to be addressed, questions I hadn't even considered when I began.

For me, the first of these questions is, "What do we do *after* we have listened?" How do we talk back? How can we do more that just consume the statements of others—a process that Bell Hooks has described as "eating the other"? Listening as it turns, out, isn't particularly difficult; having a real conversation, as it turns out, and as Jackie Royster has reminded us several times this summer, can be extremely difficult.

Someone has said that a dominant language is a dialect with an army and a navy. Translating that theory into classroom terms, we might say that a dominant language is a dialect with a grade book. In beginning our computer conference, we believed that we were banishing the army, navy, and grade book and making it possible for students to write in the language they were comfortable with, the language they ordinarily used when they had important things to say—which might be a version of Alaskan village English, or a Navajo-inflected English, or even some dialect that was inflected in a purely personal and idiosyncratic way. We agreed that, for purposes of this project, the important thing was to get students to write honestly about subjects they knew and cared about, and that we would never accomplish that goal if the teachers constantly leapt in to correct the students' grammar and syntax.

Again, I think we have succeeded in what we set out to do. Some of the student writing on the network is in polished standard English, and sometimes standard English is present only in flashes and echoes. And as it turned out, some of the writing that the teachers have found most interesting and engaging is the writing that is at the farthest remove from standard English. But once we have read and marveled at that writing, then what do we do? How do we keep from treating that writing like an artifact, an exotic object that we turn over in our hands and murmur about, then put aside? How do we talk back?

Let me turn now to those examples I promised. I want to read just a few brief samples from the conversations and exchanges on the Native American network so that you can better understand where some of my questions originate and why these issues have been on my mind.

The first is a poem, written by a freshman student at Berkeley, whose ethnic background is explained in the poem

What was her name?
She went by Hannah,
I know her as great-grandma.
He was Morris White,
great-grandpa—
a traveling Methodist minister
through the Mississippi Delta region.
She was fourteen,
tied to a pole in the middle of a farm.
She was supposed to be
a white man's slave.
He passed by her,
he watched and observed.
Days went by,
he watched and observed.
He went away.
She was quiet,
tied to a pole in the middle of a farm.
He came back,
he "rescued" her.
For a year she was hidden—
hidden with friends of the family.
He went away . . . . Again.
He came back.
She was sixteen.
He took her to Douglas County,
Georgia
and he married her.
He was black, a runaway slave.
She was Choctaw, Chickasaw,
Blackfoot.
She was seventeen,
she had a baby boy—
my great uncle Marshall.
"The rest is history."
The rest is lost . . . .
forgotten.
What was she thinking?
I want to know.
I imagine what her life was like,
the stories she told.
But my imagination is not enough.
It never will be . . . .
And it's all I have.

This is from a Navajo student.

Morning cold breeze enter from the top of the hogan, as I fasten myself to prepare my day. It is still dawn, yet my ancestors believe that waking early is a key to the way of life and that when the sun comes up, the evil spirit then become aware of who is still asleep when they are suppose to be awake. The weather seemed fine while I looked up the chimney hole, when I made breakfast below. Then I knew today would be special. I was still looking when the bright red glow hit the chimney when my grandmother walks in on a daily routine praying to the great ones. She helps me with the cooking, while I go out to free the sheep from the corral. It was then when it hit me—while I was eating about. The way things I thought was working out around my home—this is what I call home living, running everything traditionally. Then again I thought about the ways of life in the white man's world on a Saturday morning—probably children watching TV or other such non-useful daily activities. I was about done eating when I felt on how much I would miss this place if I'd ever leave my language nor my traditionality. But then again it's just another Saturday morning.

This if from a Lakota student.

At our school some teachers think we students are not capable of doing stuff that bigger schools do, just because we are Indians. Some people say the teachers shouldn't teach us Shakespeare because we won't understand. I heard his name before, but I never really knew what he wrote. You now, science is supposed to be experimenting, but we don't even have a science lab. People think that it will be too complicated for us, so we won't even do it. I wish that people would just give us a chance.

This is from a teacher in Alaska.

We had a memo from central office last week. . . about the policy changes on attendance. The memo said in effect that it is now district policy that there are no attendance requirements and students have the right to miss as much school as they wish and make up the work at their leisure. It will be interesting to see how this develops. Attendance has always been a sorry issue. Parents could not be expected to religiously trundle their youngsters off every morning to the world of the Gussacks [whites]. That was a world which placed demands on their children that they did not fully understand or they could not see the reason for. Most parents did it on faith that the Gussacks really did know what was best for their children and some godd would come of it. Other people thought the Gussacks were invading their culture and stealing their children's minds and wills and making Gussacks out of them. What we are seeing is a welling up of these repressed feelings.

This is another story from the Navajo students.

It was early, stars were fading, I could see my ancestors land across the field and the grazing of my herd. I feel like I'm home even though there's quite a ways. I was only five years old at that time I was in control of 98 sheep and 64 goats. I couldn't count that well so I let my father count for me. . . . I stayed with the herd all night long with a few snacks I brought the day before. . . . I got back home before sun-down and of course my father haves to count the sheep again. . . . The next day I had to go to school. I was in first grade then, I could still remember it clearly because it was my first day in school. Everybody was different than me, there was white, black, and even other tribe I never seen.

Much of the writing on this network is powerful; something valuable is going on here, and we teachers are learning things from watching our students and ourselves write for

the network. But what are we learning? What are we hearing?

Certainly, one thing we are hearing is that for many students, school is not a place where they feel comfortable or free to speak about their experiences or their concerns. In retrospect, I can see that my own experience of school, from first grade through my Ph.d. orals, was in *most* ways a liberating and empowering experience, one that gradually allowed me to acquire the skills, the knowledge, and the confidence I needed to take part in the conversations that seemed most important to me. And it was through school that I acquired my understanding of which conversations *were* the important ones.

In listening to these students and teachers, however, I am reminded, forcefully, that for many people school is not the inviting and liberating place that it was, and still is, for me. For some, school is a place of exclusion, a place that makes them feel they don't belong, even a place of danger.

I read to you a poem by a student who knows that her history is not part of the history she will learn about in school; hers, she says, is lost. I read a story by a Navajo student who didn't find it strange to be herding sheep all night at the age of five, but who did find it strange and disorienting to be in school at the age of five; this is the same student who expresses his anxiety about losing his language and being removed from all the things that, for him, constitute "home living." I read a comment from a student who believes that her school underestimates her and withholds things from her because she is Indian. And I read a comment from a teacher who says that some parents in his community fear that the schools are stealing their children away from them and turning them into strangers.

Why does school make these students, and some of their parents, feel frustrated or angry or afraid? Why isn't school liberating and empowering for them? That is in some ways, I realize, a disingenuous question, and clearly the answers to it are complex. I don't have many answers to offer. But I can speak of some things that, at this point, I have come to believe.

I believe, in the first place, that we have contrived, whether consciously or unconsciously, to prevent these students from talking in school about their frustration, their anger, their ambitions, their values. I think, perhaps, we've been afraid of what they would say. I think we might also have been afraid that, if they were encouraged to take part in a conversation, we might even find ourselves excluded from the conversation. Perhaps we really do want to give them the power to speak, to make them articulate. But do we want to empower them to speak to each other, to trust their own discourse?

If there is to be genuine cross-cultural conversation, are we prepared to relinquish control of it? Are we prepared to see our way of speaking as one dialect among many? Do we have the patience, or the will, to learn how to talk back?

Toward the end of the year on BreadNet, some of us on the Native American conference began an electronic discussion of these same issues that I've brought up. As we made our tentative way from theorizing about the issues to trying to figure out how to match our theories with our practice on the network, we began to speculate about whether the best way to prepare the ground for a conversation was to let the students just exchange stories. Our discussion was cut short by the end of the academic year, but I've continued to think that we had hit on an idea that was both novel and as old as the hills. We were beginning to surmise that maybe people communicated best through their stories.

Of course, there are people who have been telling us exactly this for a long time. One of my favorite writers, Leslie Marmon Silko, speaks of her origins in a family that understood the primacy of storytelling. "I come from a family," Silko says, "which has been doing something that isn't exactly standard English for a while. I come from a family which, basically, is intent on getting the stories told; and we *will* get those stories told, and language *will* work for us. It is imperative to tell and not worry about a specific language. The imperative is the telling."

My students didn't know how to respond to the Navajo student who wrote about herding sheep the night before his first day at school, but I'm sure many of my students had stories of their own about entering school. And I'll bet the Navajo student would have liked hearing them. My students just didn't know that they could exchange their stories for his stories. Maybe it's only through the slow process of listening

to other stories and then telling our own that we make further conversation possible. Are we willing to tell our own stories, to speak of our own confusion? Are we willing to acknowledge the fears we might have about threats to our own "home living," our own language, our own history? Are we willing to take that Navajo student seriously enough to exchange one of our stories for his?

As it turns out, having the last word on a complex and controversial subject isn't necessarily daunting, as long as you limit yourself to questions and don't attempt the answers. On the other hand, maybe the method I've chosen hasn't been inappropriate, since the asking of difficult and controversial questions is part of the essential business of Bread Loaf, part of the reason this is such a vital place.

But it has also been my experience that the questions change from one year to the next, and that too is surely a sign of vitality. Bread Loaf changes; it has to. We change; we have to. Some of you are graduating tonight and moving on from Bread Loaf; you have to. But I certainly hope you aren't finished with Bread Loaf, with the people you have met here, or with the conversations you have begun here. I hope your heads stay full of hard questions. I even hope that some of your conversations become more difficult and perplexing. And I hope that whenever and however you come back to Bread Loaf, you will find it, and us, changed.❑